

It's a Privilege!

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[0 : 0 0] I'd like if you would turn back with me to Romans chapter 12 and the theme of membership which I entitled It's a Privilege.

If we looked at giving's a couple of weeks ago and we said that that was a pleasure, it's a pleasure then this is a privilege, the privilege of membership. I meant to mention this at the very beginning, I just say this at this point just now, can I, I'd just like to thank people who have put in a tremendous amount of work on the last 48 hours in getting the directories ready and in getting stuff for this membership meal ready and also in helping yesterday for the conference, the UCCF conference was here yesterday and there was a huge amount of work and I just want to publicly thank everyone who was involved in that for the hours that they put in way above and beyond the call of duty and I would be a shining example of the commitment that is based on their love for Jesus Christ and I'm very grateful to them for all that they have done.

But what I want to do this morning is I want to focus for a little while just on this chapter in Romans 12 loosely in a sense, not going into it in great detail, but seeing the principal teaching that comes through it with regard to our Christian lives and what we are as Christians and how that fits in with the concept of membership because you know you might be here saying well I don't see anything in the Bible that talks about membership and you be right, it doesn't formally talk about membership and the need to become a member at that level in a formal kind of level of the church.

But what I don't want to do is I don't want to focus on a denominational badge of membership, I'm not interested in focusing on some kind of institutional formality that membership might represent or some kind of rite of passage that you might think it is about, but rather I want you to see it as a reflection of a New Testament understanding of the church and I think that's come through in what has already been said, the understanding of commitment to one another, the understanding of community and of pastoral oversight and of God's own structures for how the church is to be governed and looked after and the pastoral care that's involved in being committed as a people to God, I know of no other model than the kind of model that's given in the New Testament which is reflected in the concept of membership.

Now I appreciate for some people that membership is a very difficult concept, the idea, sometimes commitment is a very difficult, commitment for some people is a lot easier than for others and there may be lots of reasons for that, but I do appreciate that for some commitment and membership of a church is very hard, I know and I understand that a lot of people have been hurt by churches and by the way churches have acted and way leaders have acted in churches, I know that many have some of a no kind of model in which to base the whole idea of commitment in that form and membership and there's some people who are very private by nature and find a whole idea of committing to something corporate, something bigger than themselves also very difficult and I have no, I have no axe to grind in any way with anyone who has these difficulties whatsoever, but there is a recognition for us that the Christian life for all of us has challenges and some other aspects might be challenging to somebody else whereas committing and being involved might challenge you and might be difficult for you and yet what we're to find ourselves doing is to mould our lives towards

[3 : 54] Christ and towards the model of Christ and in some areas that will involve more difficulty than it will in other areas and we are all different in that, but can I take the general principles of being committed and use that as the basis for what I want to say this morning in terms of being involved with God's people at a local level and not as Ross was saying, not just that kind of general pervasive involvement with the whole people of God throughout the world but something a bit more focused and more tangible and more close and by way of that by introducing it by saying that the whole idea is based on being committed to Jesus Christ. There's a great, there's a great that first, the first couple of verses in Romans 12 are great verses, they're really tremendous verses, therefore, remember we looked at it as therefore before, it's the kind of bridging word, it's a word that bridges everything that's happened in the previous, well in this case previous 11 chapters which are talking about salvation and the gospel and the amazing grace of God and the salvation that Jesus Christ offers and theology and everything else and it says therefore in the light of all that, they are due, offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual act or reasonable act of worship, do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind then you'll be able to test and approve what God's will is, is good, perfect, pleasing and perfect will and that really is a great summary verse that speaks about what it is to be a Christian, it's about being committed to Jesus Christ, it's speaking about having a personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that you've come to recognise and know and understand what the Bible teaches about you, about me, about our needs spiritually and about what Christ has done for us and what he offers to us and that we can come to accept his saving grace and have a personal faith with him and from that live a sacrificial life for Jesus Christ because he's worth it, that you live, you know, so it's far more than just the kind of one hour when we gather together or the denominational structure or whatever else we think churches is that recognition that our lives become living sacrifices to God, fully unacceptable because of what he has done for us is that commitment to Christ and linking that to membership, the only qualification that we give for membership of the church is a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, that's all we're looking for because we're inviting people to join with us in this gospel work, in the Kingdom of God, in the congregational work and the basis of that is not the number of years you've been going along, your biblical knowledge or your family background or anything else, it's a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that is the focus and is the basis of inviting you into membership. Now people who, the elders and the deacons, to become elders and deacons, they have to be, to do more than that, they have to subscribe to a certain set of confessional standards, a certain theological standpoint but we don't ask for that in our members, we simply ask for that for those who take office. So you might have different views on baptism or you might have different ecclesiology to us or there may be different issues that you think differently from maybe what we confessionally believe but that doesn't stop you becoming a member of the church, the membership of St. Columbus is based on, the free church is based on this personal testimony. I've invited people today or to a meal, we've invited people to a meal, those who are joining us in membership, one thing I asked them to do and I've got some of them back, is to ask them to write up to an A4 side of paper writing down their

own personal testimony. Now I'm not going to get them to read that, I'm not going to get them to actually say that yet but I think it's a good thing for us to do is to be able to have a reason for the hope that you have and are able to verbalise it in some way and sometimes writing it down really helps. So I think it's a good practice, you try it, writing down in a short summary how you came to faith, how you've become a believer and what it means for you to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for your salvation. Maybe a good way to start it would be to say well if I die today this would be my hope of getting to heaven and it would be what is your hope of getting to heaven? Is it based on anything other than your faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour who has died for you and has opened up the way to heaven and the way to God for you? And that's the kind of thing that we're looking for so that we know that people are walking down the road that is the road of grace and the road of salvation. So the commitment to Jesus Christ is so central to your life I hope and to mine and therefore our lives are a rational reasonable spiritual response to what Jesus has done for us. So the response to grace is that a word from the same root is gratitude. So what Paul is speaking about here is that we give our lives to God in sacrifice, a living sacrifice because of his grace and the motivation is gratitude, grace and gratitude going together. So we live for him not because we're members of the church or not because we're better or we might get a hard time or not because maybe that will get me into heaven but we serve him because we're full of gratitude because of his grace and that's hugely significant and we do that practically. It's interesting that Paul here says offer your bodies, you know, your feet and your legs and your hands and your head, your body, your physical body, what you walk with, what you talk with, what you use in your everyday life, what you go to work with, offer your bodies as living sacrifices and you do that by transforming what your mind. So there's a grace as you use your body and use your mind together as living sacrifices to serve and so the Christian ethic involves our minds motivating our bodies to live in a certain way and following him.

Karl Barth talks about the great disturbance of Christian ethics, that the ethics of the gospel, they rattle our cages and they challenge us about how to walk, how to live physically, how to live using our minds and enacting it accordingly. We're committed to Christ and what does that look like? Well in terms of being involved in the local church, I think it means being committed to the spiritual care. That's very important is that we come under the structure that God has ordained for us which is one of oversight, spiritual oversight under shepherds, those that are appointed by God to lead spiritually and to be shepherds. But that simply speaks about a pastoral oversight that goes beyond that and there should be in our own congregation a commitment to spiritual care for one another which was already spoken about. But the renewing of our minds is often done through the church, through being involved in the church, from sharing spiritual experience, from learning how to read the Bible individually and together, under the preaching, under the leadership, under being accountable to one another, having an overflowing of spiritual care for each other. Pastoral care isn't just my job and isn't even just the elder's job, it's the job of all of us as Christians towards one another. We outwork our commitment to Christ by having a spiritual care for one another and by being willing to come under the spiritual oversight of the church and of those within the church. And now that's a great challenge for us. It's a great challenge to our individuality. It's a great challenge to our understanding of accountability, of responsibility, of authority, of say, well, you know, I'm on

Christ, I don't need anyone, I don't need any priests under me or anything like that. But it's not saying that, it's simply recognising that we all need each other and as human beings we are all accountable to one another and God has set his own structure for that. It's a great challenge to be pastorally caring for one another. It's a challenge to our willingness to be forgiven. It's a challenge to our willingness to deal with secret sin, to deal with spiritual evasion so that we're not accountable to anyone. We just want to live our own lives our own way. And we will always be able to justify our non-commitment to spiritual care. There's always going to be a reason why we could justify it and say, well, I don't need to be under that because maybe there's lots of reasons, humanly speaking, lots of faults and lots of errors within the church. But what I would ask you to do is to consider your motive if you're afraid of coming under the pastoral care, if you're afraid of being accountable, if you're afraid of people exposing things in your life in love, that you say, well, that's really not the best way to be living as a Christian. And if you're afraid of ever saying that to anyone else within the community of believers, within the concept of a loving community, can I ask you if that's your situation to consider your motive for not being submissive to one another and to the spiritual leadership of the congregation? Is it pride? Is it because you know better? Is it because of self-righteousness or cynicism? Or because you don't accept what the Bible teaches about the structures is still relevant today? Is it because you lack forgiveness in your own life and therefore not willing to accept forgiveness? Are you full of doubt? Is it a reasonable position that you take up? Because being committed to pastoral care is hugely significant. And this chapter and what it speaks about in terms of people's gifts and the position of leadership and their attitude to one another is all related to that. Now it also means not only commitment to spiritual care, it also means commitment to community. In verse five it says, So in Christ we who are many form one body and each member belongs to all the others. So in that sense, that's one of the few places it does actually talk about membership, but not in the same sense maybe as we would understand that it's just talking about being members of the body of Christ and that kind of more general level. And then verses nine to 21 are very practical outworking of being committed to community. Now I know I'm always banging on about community here because I have no other model, scripturally, that we can have. That it's an outworking of our love for Jesus

Christ as we live in love and in relationship with one another, which is why we have sweated buckets to move beyond simply having a gathered church on a Sunday to developing more intimate city group communities, which we hope will continue to develop. And we've written, I'm going to say a little bit more about that in a minute, but this hugely significant section which talks about being devoted to one another and brotherly love and how that works itself out, not repaying evil for evil, not cursing, rejoicing with those who are born with those in living harmony. Do not be willing to associate. Do not be, you know, it's just it's just tumbling over with practical implications of what it means to be involved in community.

[16 : 47] If you read this chapter, if you read the Holy Spirit, you read with closed eyes, if you can't see this. And if you justify an absolutely private individual walk with God, because this is such an important and it's such a battle for every one of us, very little of our Christian life is worked out as an island is worked out in private. Now I know for some people that's harder than for others. And I know there's hard to overcome. And I know there's your job makes it very difficult. I know there's people who work shifts and I know there's all kinds of barriers because it's so important. The devil puts up lots of barriers. And because it's so important, generally, there's lots of barriers to date in the secular side, which we look towards that. But it's a hugely significant outworking of a personal faith in Jesus Christ and membership is a token of that. It's really just an expression of that. Grace, as Emma said, it's a great encouragement at that level. And grace is never in a vacuum. I know it's tough, life changing, uncomfortable, healing. But it's where we express the fruit of the spirit in our lives, you know, the fruit of the spirit and also the gifts of the spirit, which I say a little bit more about at the end. And we have this big church, small church idea, which, you know, for better or worse is what we've got. You might have a better model. There's no perfect model, but we're battling away at this model because in the big church, like here on Sunday, and it's all relative, it's not that big. It was a bit bigger yesterday. Not so big today. I hope it'll be bigger. There's encouragement there, isn't there? There's the ability to have kind of coordinated teaching from the front. There's diversity. There's a power in being altogether in many ways. We can know a great prayer life together. We can share gifts and share our gifts. There's more resources as a big church together. There's more opportunities in many ways to serve. But it's limited. Big church is limited. You need to come and go from big church. It's easy to be unnoticed in big church. It's easy to be uncommitted in big church. It's easy to stand on the edge of big church because, well, everyone else is doing it. And there's people who are doing things in big church. So we recognize that the teaching of community is so significant that closeness and intimacy and what's involved in that is so significant that we are trying to develop that sense of closer, more intimate community within the city. I'm going to read something. I don't fall asleep. I'm going to read something. If I'd been more organized,

I would have got someone else to read it. But I wasn't more organized because I think it would be better if someone else would. Because you're more likely to listen. But I want you to listen anyway. I packed with me to listen to this. I'm going to read it. And it's from a book called How People Change. It's a book that's important to us. It's a book we're using. It's a book at the moment as elders were reading, or at least we've promised to read. Elders' heads might all be going down at this point if they haven't started reading it. But it's quite a long section, okay? But I'll try and read it interestingly. Because it's speaking about the importance of community and the importance in the life of somebody who has written this section for the book, what small group, what it meant for her, for her family. Now, that's how long it is. Yeah, it's pretty long, Genmo. Do you think I should read half of it or all of it? All of it? Okay, right. I'll take five minutes. So it's very good. But you have to imagine I'm a woman, okay? Which might be easier for some than others. My husband and I have been part of the same small group for the past five years.

Like many small groups, we regularly share a meal together, love one another practically, and serve together to meet needs outside our small group. We worship, study God's word, and pray. It has been a rich time to grow in our understanding of God, what Jesus has accomplished for us, God's purposes for us as part of his kingdom, his power and desire to change us, and many other precious truths. We have grown in our love for God and others, and have been challenged to repent of our sin and trust God in every area of our lives.

It was a new and refreshing experience for us to be in a group where people were willing to share their struggles with temptation and sin and ask for prayer. We've been welcomed by others, challenged to become more vulnerable, held up in prayer, encouraged in specific ongoing struggles, and have developed sweet friendships. I have seen one woman who had one foot in the world and one foot in the church openly share her struggles with us.

We prayed that God would show her the way of escape from temptation many times, and they've seen God's work in delivering her. Her openness has given us a front row seat to see the power of God intersect with her and our weakness. Her continued vulnerability and growth in godliness encourage us to be humble with one another and believe that God is able to change us too, but halfway through, and it gets better. Because years have now passed in close community, God's work can be seen more clearly than on a week by week basis. One man who had some deep struggles and a lot of anger has grown through repenting of sin and being vulnerable one to one in the group. He has been willing to hear the encouragement and challenges of others and to stay in community throughout his struggle. He has become an example in serving others, a better listener and more gentle with his wife. As a group, we have confronted anxiety, interpersonal strife, the need for forgiveness, lust, family troubles, unbelief, the fear of men, hypocrisy, unemployment, sickness, lack of love, idolatry and marital strife. We have been helped, held accountable and lifted up by one another. We have also grieved together, celebrated together, laughed together, offended one another, reconciled with one another, put up with one another and sought to love God and one another. As a group, we were saddened in the spring when a man who had recently joined us felt that we had let him down by not being sensitive to his loneliness. He chose to leave. I say this because with all the benefits of being in a small group, it is still just a group of sinners. It is Jesus who makes it worth getting together. Apart from our relationship with him, we have nothing to offer. But because our focus is on Jesus, the group has the potential to make significant and life-changing differences in all our lives. When seven o'clock on Monday comes around, I eagerly look forward to the sound of my brothers and sisters coming in the front door. I never know how the evening will go, what burdens we will be carrying, how I will be challenged or what laughter or tears we will share, but I always know that the great shepherd will meet us and that our lives will be richer and fuller because we have been together. I hope that by hearing my story you will be encouraged to make a commitment to become part of a small group and experience the blessing of Christian community within the smaller, more intimate setting that makes it possible. Now that for me summarises everything that we are trying to do. In our own way, in Edinburgh here in St. Columbus with the big church, small church concept and I hope that you can buy into that, not as some kind of fantastic model, but because it is the best way that we feel of being accountable and knowing one another in Christ. And lastly and very briefly, a commitment to calling, not just to community and not just to spiritual care in Christ, but also to calling, in other words to use our gifts versus six to eight of the chapter within this whole concept of the chapter which is speaking about really commitment, talks about us having different gifts and all these different gifts that we have to use it for the glory of Christ. So using our gifts, serving, it is counter cultural. We expect and maybe our model is that we come to church, we arrive at church, we sit in church and we expect through even the physicality of what we are doing to be served, to be receiving. Now there is an element of receiving always isn't there, but it is receiving like receiving food in order to have the energy and the zeal and the spiritual life to go and to serve Christ. So it is counter cultural to see church

[25 : 47] is something not that we receive from or not that is outside of ourselves but something that we come and become involved in as a family and serve to look around us, to offer, to pray, to give. And again one of the problems of bigger churches in bigger church, you always think someone else is doing it, someone else can do it, someone else is able to do it.

So it is about recognising the significance of serving. And serving in that context is a Christian which is recognising that we are not really to think too highly of ourselves.

I love that verse in verse 3, for the grace given by me say to everyone, do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgment. Isn't that a beautiful verse? It is not about me, it is not all about me serving and offering what I can offer and taking the huff if my gifts aren't used appropriately, but it is about serving, it is about using our gifts, it is about using the fruit of the Spirit in our lives whether we have got the gifts or not. It is not simply about using the special gifts God has given us, but it is about seeing need and responding to need and committing ourselves, serving with the fruit of the Spirit. I think we often forget that, we spend a lot of time talking about the gifts of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit are important and we can ask for gifts and we can ask for more gifts, but we also serve with the fruit of the Spirit. We serve with the fruit, the different spiritual characteristics, love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, gentleness, making a self-control, these are ways of serving and use your gifts where you can, there are many opportunities to use your gifts, look at them, that is one of the reasons we put out that kind of gift audit, the changing congregation and things like that. We need to recapture and remember that people want to serve and people have gifts and we want to highlight that and we want you to tell us what gifts you have as well, so please take time to think about that and fill in that form if you can and return it to us. Use your gifts in formal ways, but most importantly can I say it's about sharing you, sharing yourself, sharing your life, that's the best gift you can give, your personality, your friendship, your home, your money, your talents, your prayers, serving you, giving yourself, that's the greatest thing and that's what you all have to give, you all have to give unique, beautiful, talented gifts of yourself to serve Jesus Christ in the structure of this congregation and I would really encourage you to serve in your city groups as well, be part of that, serve on the dreaded rotas, serve in the music, administration and kids church, serve by speaking to the person next year that's maybe there for the first time, really significant, serve by being an evangelist, serve by lots of different ways that you can serve, but whatever you do, however you do it, whether it is in these mundane, ordinary, unglamorous ways, give it your best, give it your very best, they talk about these stone masons that built this and other churches and if Colin or myself climbs up onto the roof and staggers over some different parts of the roof and you come to a little bit that nobody can see anywhere and there's a beautifully ornate stone that's been carved out, nobody can see it, if we go back in time and ask the stone masons, why do you bother doing that, nobody can see it, because I'm doing it for God and for His glory, whether people see it or not, you see that in all of these great, whatever we think of these buildings, the care and the beauty of the work was to the glory of God and so whether it's the boring, ordinary tasks, it's whether it's about coming on time, it's about knowing what to do and taking the time to find out and doing the very best because you know very often the little things we're doing here is the first port of call people will have with the church, the way you welcome them in the door, what you say to them if they sit beside you or the way you offer them tea and coffee,

these are the first windows of opportunity people have to get some kind of idea of what we're like as a community, so these things you know, oh man I'm on door duty today, what a disaster, try and say oh praise God, I'm on door duty today and have the opportunity to welcome people who might never come or hopefully will not never come again but they might come again because of the welcome they've received and we know that's not all it's about but doing everything for God and for his glory is so significant for us. Verse 11 is a kind of for me a summarizing verse for us in our lives and our spiritual lives and our commitment to Christ and in our involvement of the church, never be lacking in zeal but keep your spiritual fervour serving the Lord, never be lacking in zeal, that's tough isn't it, in fact it's impossible, praise God it's impossible because what this verse should do is should throw you on your knees and ask God for the strength to do these things and ask Christ for a clear vision of his glory and grace that will be never lacking in zeal but that we will have spiritual fervour serving the Lord, so today really looking at membership was in the light of the gospel, in the light of Calvary, in the light of the New Testament and not as anything else and I hope you would take it in that way today. So let's bow our heads and pray. Father God we thank you that you're a great God, we thank you that we will often feel uncomfortable in your presence and we thank God that that's the case. We thank you Lord that you expose the things that are damaging and cancerous in our lives, spiritually damaging and yet we know that sometimes we react against the changes that are needed because we are comfortable in our sin or comfortable in our understanding but

Lord may we be people who come under the power and the healing grace and the love of your word and know that you're committed to our change, you're committed to our holiness and you're committed to help us live holy and acceptable lives and you empower us to do that and it's living life to the full and it's dealing with the things that separate us from you. Forgive us when we hold on with grim determination to things that we know are damaging for us and are unhealthy spiritually. Forgive us for our love of sin and help us rather to love you and to be committed to you and to serve you. So bless our worship today, bless our time with those who are coming into membership this afternoon, we thank you for that and we also pray and ask that your blessing will be on Bruntsfield as they meet this morning and on Christchurch and Creagantonie as they meet and on the other churches in

[33 : 55] Edinburgh, our own sister churches in Bucleon Leith and throughout the church, our friends and those that were in partnership with the gospel. We ask these things in Jesus' name, Amen.